

Parent denounces full reopening of schools across Brazil

Our reporter

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While Brazil's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro is being indicted for crimes against humanity for his "herd immunity" policies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Brazilian ruling class as a whole is continuing these homicidal measures, radically expanding the reopening of schools in the country. The predictable effect of this policy will be massive infections and deaths of children and teenagers.

Brazil continues to register ominous figures in the pandemic, with daily averages of 12,000 cases and 350 deaths. Serious scientists, like neuroscientist Miguel Nicolelis, continue to warn of blatant underreporting of infections in the country and of the imminence of a new explosion of cases and deaths driven by the Delta variant of the coronavirus.

As part of the efforts to declare a fictitious "end of the pandemic," states like Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, governed by the openly right-wing PSC and PSDB parties, as well as Ceará and Bahia, governed by the supposedly "progressive" Workers Party (PT), have decreed the end of any social distancing within schools. The so-called hybrid teaching systems, that alternate between in-person and online classes, are being replaced by exclusively in-person teaching in overcrowded classrooms with unvaccinated children.

There is growing opposition from Brazilian parents and educators to this criminal policy. We publish here a statement by musician Anderson Pequeno, father of a six-year-old son enrolled in a municipal public school in Rio de Janeiro. He is actively fighting against the disinformation campaign by the federal and state governments along with the corporate media and demanding safe education in Brazil.

With the purpose of unifying the struggles of parents like Anderson with other workers around the world, and arming them with the most advanced scientific knowledge about the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Socialist Web Site and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) will hold the online event "How to End the Pandemic," Sunday, October 24.

WSWS: Can you speak about the situation you are experiencing with your son and what the RJ government is imposing on parents like you?

Anderson: I live with my mother and I have shared custody of my son, as his mother and I are divorced. When the pandemic started, I didn't see him for a while for fear of putting his grandmother at risk. We saw each other only by video calls. But in October 2020, my mother went to her sisters' house, and I started to stay with my son, week in and week out.

Last year, my son was having only online lessons. We were able to accomplish his age-appropriate activities, sent by his teacher. We

were safe in the house, and that was the most important thing for me. But since the beginning of this year, there was a lot of pressure for the return to schools. I wasn't in favor of his return, but his mother was.

The week that school was about to start, the principal and one of the teachers at my son's school, who had already returned to prepare the school, were infected with the coronavirus. The school suspended its reopening. After a week, we had the news that the principal of the school passed away. It was very heavy for the teachers and for us as families to know that she passed away in the middle of this pandemic, a week before the in-person learning was proposed to start.

After watching a disaster so close to us, I imagined that my son would not return to the school. When the school reopened, he went back to in-person learning in the hybrid mode, with the classroom divided in order to have few students. One group went in-person each week, with online activities for those who stayed at home.

During this hybrid learning period, the school had infections, but it didn't close. I think that only the classrooms with someone infected were closed, something that I also found absurd. I think that teachers and principals must have been under a lot of pressure to keep the school open. It must have been hard for them too, to have lost the school principal and being there seeing infections, but with pressure to keep the school open.

About two weeks ago, the mayor of Rio de Janeiro [Eduardo Paes, from the Social Democratic Party (PSC)] and the secretary of education announced the return of 100 percent of the students, with no distance between desks. Since then, I can't sleep anymore. I have no peace. It has been two weeks now that I am looking for some way to fight against this.

Because we still have outbreaks in England, children suffering from long COVID in Israel and the United States with many child deaths. I even have family in the US, and a nephew who got infected. So, we are watching everything that is happening internationally and we are making the same mistakes in Brazil.

I don't see the media talking about these issues in other countries, which are very serious today. I have already sent emails to congressmen, city councilmen, senators, and nobody answers. It seems that everyone agrees; that they don't see what is happening out in the world. At the very least that's it. But there are certainly other issues involved.

WSWS: What are, in your opinion, the interests involved in this irresponsible reopening of schools?

Anderson: I think that the big stakeholders in this forced return to the schools here in Brazil are the television networks, which make a lot of money from the New Year celebrations and Carnival. But there is also an interest of politicians, because in 2022 we will have

elections for president, governors, deputies and senators, and the campaigns are already starting. Many politicians claimed to be defenders of science in the middle of the pandemic, but this moment has passed and now their interest is purely electoral.

I must also mention the big businessmen. We saw during the pandemic how the billionaires made money on top of all the suffering. They are certainly interested in life getting back to normal faster and their profits continuing. They are not interested in whether one will die or a thousand. So, they are interested in this faster return of the economy to the way they like it.

Specifically, here in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro, this return also has to do with the food vouchers the government is obliged to provide to the neediest families. It is a voucher of only 54 reais (US\$ 9.50) that these families receive to buy food. Some months ago, the government went to court demanding not to pay it and lost. It was after this legal defeat that they announced the return to exclusively in-person classes and with all the students. This way, the city government would no longer need to pay food vouchers to these people who need so much at a time of widespread hunger and many difficulties here in Brazil.

The fact is that rulers want our children to get infected. They are aware that children contract this disease. They know that in a closed environment with many students there will be infections, but they are not worried about it.

WSWS: What is the current situation of schools in Rio de Janeiro?

Anderson: Even before the pandemic, Brazilian schools needed more attention, especially public schools. Those who study in private schools, who can pay for a better education, have a huge advantage to get into universities. And those who come from public school struggle a lot to get there.

Now, with the pandemic, what is going to happen is that the classrooms will be crowded. Sometimes classrooms have 40 students, without ventilation, without enough employees to clean the schools, without structure. And it is the perfect scenario for the virus to learn how to break down anyone's immunity.

That is why I think that this is not the moment yet. In a little while vaccines will arrive for the children. In the meantime, let's fight for quality distance education. Let's give some assistance to the teachers as well. This is possible, and this is what we have to fight for now. Because putting children who can get infected inside schools is the worst option.

WSWS: How are you and other parents responding to this irresponsible reopening policy?

Anderson: The cause that I stand for is nothing more than defending children and teenagers from a deadly virus, a virus that has already killed thousands of children and adolescents here in Brazil alone. Our country is one of the leaders in deaths of young people by this virus. How can I not defend my child from this? What parent wants to risk their child having long COVID, with memory loss in a formative period?

In this search for support, I met parents and caretakers here in Rio de Janeiro and in other states in Brazil who think like I do. We are getting together and looking for some way to have our voice transmitted. Even this is difficult, because nobody is interested in talking about schools being closed. When you see a reporter on TV talking about the return of schools with 100 percent of students they are smiling, as if we were not in a pandemic anymore. But we who don't agree with the return of schools in this way are uniting.

After having tried with politicians and not getting the slightest

support, I joined groups of parents from Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo who are in the same fight, so that our children can continue protecting themselves from being infected. And I created a petition here in Rio de Janeiro to show the government our dissatisfaction with this abrupt return at the end of the Brazilian school year.

WSWS: How did you decide to join the October 15 international school strike?

Anderson: Seeing that the Brazilian media wasn't interested in talking about the pandemic anymore, I searched the internet for information and came across Twitter. I found groups of scientists who do amazing work in Brazil and were warning that we still live in a critical moment in the country. This message was much more real to me, and I saw how different it was from the media and the current political message.

I also met parents and caretakers who were experiencing similar difficulties in the US, UK and several other countries. I saw that a mother from the UK, Lisa Diaz, had just posted a video talking about all that is happening to the children who returned to school in her and other countries, about the amount of child deaths happening in the US. So I started to follow Lisa and her other followers.

I saw that the cause was more than just and that there were other people thinking like me. That was a great relief, to feel that you belong to a cause. From then on, I started using Twitter a lot, reposting their posts, and I saw that on the week of October 15 I would be with my son at home and could participate in the school strike movement. And that's what we did. I made a post with the hashtags proposed by Lisa, and my son and I participated in this strike. And we are prepared for future dates.

I would like to remind people that we have already passed 600,000 official COVID-19 deaths in Brazil. But there is underreporting, and some say we are above 700,000 or 800,000 deaths from this disease. We are very tired, there are reports in the groups in which I participate of mothers with psychological problems, fathers who can't sleep like me. But we will not give up. For us it is so fair what we are doing: on one side it is possible to solve the pandemic, and on the other to put everything to waste and have bigger problems again because of irresponsible reopening of schools. Thank you very much for the opportunity and keep on fighting!



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